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CHOU EN-LAI AND THE OPENING
TO THE WEST

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8 SEPTEMBER 1989

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 08 SEP 1989		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Chou En-Lai and the Opening to the West				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 9	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

CHOU EN-LAI AND THE OPENING TO THE WEST

We must never adopt an arrogant attitude of great power chauvinism and become conceited because of the victory of our revolution and certain achievements in our construction. Every nation, big or small, has its strong and weak points.

-- Chm Mao Tse-tung, 1956

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the grand strategy and statecraft of Chou En-lai during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The paper will identify the national interests of China, the goals and objectives of Chou En-lai, and the instruments of statecraft which led to a reversal in United States policy and its formal recognition of the communist dominated People's Republic of China.

Chou En-lai was born in a middle-class family in 1898. He has been described as a brilliant student and studied and worked in France and Germany in the 1920s. An individual of tremendous patience and personal intelligence, Chou En-lai was the first Premier of the People's Republic of China, a position which he held for over twenty-five years. Chou was described by Dr. Henry Kissinger as a "figure out of history, equally at home in

philosophy, reminiscence, historical analysis, tactical probes, (and) humorous repartee." It is perhaps these appreciations which facilitated Dr. Kissinger's immediate respect and rapport with the Communist Chinese Premier. Some of the eventual success of Chou's diplomacy might also be attributed to the fact that Dr. Kissinger's possessed of many of the same qualities which he attributed to Chou En-lai.

Officially, at least for the United States of America, "Mainland China" (Peoples Republic of China) ceased to exist following the Communist takeover in 1949. In responding to the Communists' assumption of power, the United States adopted a policy of non-recognition towards the newly formed government, led by party Chairman Mao Tse-tung. In "Mainland China's" stead, the United States continued to recognize the Nationalist Chinese leader Chang Kai-shek and the relatively small number of refugees, which had fled the mainland to the island of Taiwan, as the official representatives of the over 800 million Chinese people, most of which were then under Communist domination. This policy of official non-recognition of the People's Republic continued for a period of over 20 years.

Although in the late 1960s the United States seemed to be signalling some receptivity for potential change in her relations with China, it was Chou En-lai's initiation of secret negotiations through a Pakistani channel in early 1970 which

ultimately led to an invitation for a visit to China by a high ranking United States official. Following two preliminary visits by Dr. Kissinger, first in 1971 and then in 1972, it was President Nixon who symbolically reopened China's door to the world with his formal visit to the People's Republic conducted in February 1972. I view Chou En-lai as the primary strategist whose purpose and vision played the leading role in engineering China's rapprochement with the United States and other members of the Western World. The successful implementation of Chou's strategy resulted in a major change to China's role on the world stage. Practically overnight China was elevated from its outcast position to one of prominence as emerging leader, specifically for the block of non-aligned "Third World" nations in the United Nations.

National Interests

China has viewed herself as a nation who possessed a tremendous level of self-sufficiency. Additionally, China has consistently held to a belief of Chinese cultural superiority comparative to any western society. Then what could lead China towards a rapprochement in her relations with the United States and other nations of the Western World? As will be discussed below, I believe the principal motivation for Chou En-lai's grand strategy and the ultimate opening to the west became the fundamental issues of survival and national security.

It is essential to acknowledge three of the significant forces which were at work in Chou's mind, those of nationalism, emergence from the cultural revolution, and Marxist-Communist ideologies. Internally, the Cultural Revolution had dramatically reduced the power of China's party and government apparatuses and in its trail left considerable disarray. This fact combined with the deteriorating status of relations with the Soviet Union proving to be the overriding determinate for Chou En-lai's national strategy formulations.

Threat

Chou En-lai clearly appreciated the relative strength of national and specifically military power possessed by the Worlds two superpowers, particularly that of China's immediate northern neighbor and ideological competitor, the Soviet Union. Chou further perceived that the principal threats to China would arise from the forces of imperialism and social-imperialism. National objectives for both the United States and the Soviet Union were seen as directed towards achieving a global hegemony. Perhaps Chou En-lai's most primal fear was the possibility of collusion between the two superpowers to the above end.

In the latter portion of the 1960s, China began to perceive an increasing threat from the Soviet Union. The Soviet's

invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 undoubtedly was a major contributor to this perception of a growing threat. Further, in March of 1969, China found herself in a direct military confrontation with the Soviet forces over the disputed possession of several small islands located in the Ussuri River, which separated Chinese Manchuria from Soviet Siberia, as well as at other points along their border. These threats probably served to bring the Cultural Revolution to a close, lest China's internal turmoil further encourage Soviet aggression.

Assessment of Power

Chou En-lai's analysis of China's power, although acknowledging her perceived societal and cultural strengths, was realistic enough to admit limitations to her military and economic positions vis a vis the Soviet Union. Chou assessed the distribution of world power by describing three groupings of nations. First were the two "Superpowers", the Soviet Union and the United States. The second grouping, in terms of relative national power, was termed the "Second Intermediate Zone" and was composed of "advanced, capitalist nations" such as Japan and Western Europe. Chou's third grouping was the "Third World" with principal membership coming from the "emerging societies" of the Afro-Asian and Latin American countries. He saw American power declining as result of its deteriorating situation in Vietnam. Chou hypothesized that the new American administration might well

be seeking some way to counter its loss of prestige in the Pacific. According to Robert A. Scalapino, "China was interested in the Americans because she assumed that the United States would continue to be both strong and present in the Pacific-Asian area." In short Chou's assessment of the distribution of power led him to the conclusion that an isolated China did not have the strength to balance the Soviet Union by herself. He therefore sought the United States as the only available counterweight of sufficient displacement to balance the power of China's neighbor, the Soviet Union.

Opportunities and Constraints

China's basic philosophical approach to affairs has consistently emphasized a theme of self-reliance. However, in the latter part of the 1960s, as China emerged from the depth of its Cultural Revolution, debate of internal economic needs and policies once again became a "hot topic" among China's leaders. This probably led to a heightened appreciation to the potential worth of technological gains, increased trade and investment growth. This is not to suggest that the implementation of Chou En-lai's grand strategy was not without direct risks. After all had his initiatives with United States failed publicly, China would have found the Soviet Union emboldened more than ever; not to mention the obvious loss of face for China's revered Premier.

Objectives

Chou En-lai identified several goals in conjunction with his overall strategy for opening to the West. Specific policy objectives included avoidance of a Soviet hegemony in Asia and the Pacific. He saw a need to develop hedges against possible future Soviet diplomatic and military pressures. In simple terms, a new relation with the United States would lead to a more favorable balance of power, increasing China's range of diplomatic options. As Dr. Kissinger wrote to the President:

The Chinese want to relieve themselves of the threat of a two-front war, introduce new calculations in Moscow about attacking or leaning on the PRC and perhaps make the USSR more pliable in its dealing with Peking. Specifically from us they want assurances against US-USSR collusion.

China, by moving ahead with improved relations between herself and the United States, would help to counter the risks of Soviet-United States collusion growing out of efforts for Détente. Chou also sought improved stability in relations with Japan and Western Europe, which would be an expected side benefit of formal United States recognition. Besides the obvious geopolitical advantages to China's security, those nations of the "Second Intermediate Zone" held many keys which might assist in unlocking China's untapped economic potential. Additionally,

Chou sought admission to the United Nations community, enabling China to assume its "rightful role of leadership" in the "Third World".

Results

Chou En-lai's grand strategy was not only skillfully formulated, but equally as skillfully implemented during the period of 1970 till his death in 1975. The principal tool which China called upon was the personal diplomacy of its Premier Chou En-lai.

Lessons

Certainly one significant lesson for the United States is an understanding that nations which possess Communist governments can not indiscriminantly be viewed as Moscow surrogates. Other lessons can be drawn from the smoothness and rapidity with which two bitter, ideological enemies were able to recast their relations before an amazed world. What factors allowed this to occur? First, the United States and China had been brought together out of necessity. China's needs have been presented above. The United States administration felt a need to arrest the erosion of national power, balancing with new gains, in Asia and the Pacific, its losses sustained in Vietnam. Second, although numerous differences in geopolitical perspective unquestionably